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Soil Conservation Service

Program Aid Number 1354

Small Watershed Projects



Small Watershed Projects

The Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act, Public Law 566, authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to give technical and financial aid to local organizations for planning and carrying out watershed projects. Objectives of the watershed program administered by the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) are flood prevention, agricultural water management, recreation, municipal and industrial water supply, and fish and wildlife development. Assistance is available without regard to race, creed, color, sex, or national origin.

The Application

Preparing the application.

Any legally qualified local organization may submit an application. The application includes the size and location of the watershed, a description of the problem, the extent of damages, details about the work needed, and the source of local funds.

Assistance in preparing applications can be obtained at the local SCS office. The local organization sends its application to the agency designated by the governor as the state clearinghouse and to the SCS state office.

Field examination.

Technical specialists from SCS, Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and other interested federal and state agencies may be asked to examine the watershed site, depending on the problems identified in the application.

State action.

If the state agency disapproves the application, it notifies the local organization. If the application is approved, the agency sends it to the SCS state conservationist, who notifies the SCS Chief in Washington, D.C.

Planning authorization.

Based on planning priorities recommended by the state agency, the state conservationist makes preliminary investigations, reconfirms the local organization's desire to proceed with preparing a watershed plan, and recommends to the Chief that assistance in planning be authorized. The state conservationist notifies the local organization when assistance has been authorized.

Watershed Plan-Environmental Impact Statement

Detailed field studies.

SCS, Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and other interested federal and state agencies assist the local organization by making detailed field studies to define the task and to specify the costs and the benefits. The benefits must exceed the costs.

Watershed plan preparation.

The local organization prepares a watershed plan-Environmental Impact Statement (plan-EIS) with SCS assistance. The plan describes the problems; the proposed measures—how, when, and by whom they are to be installed; the environmental effects; and the methods of financing. After thorough review, both the local organization and SCS sign the watershed agreement.

Plan-EIS approval.

If funds are available, the Chief can authorize operations to begin at once, provided—

- a. The estimated federal contribution to construction costs does not exceed \$5 million; and

b. The plan does not contain any single structure that has a total capacity of more than 2,500 acre-feet.

If the estimated federal contribution to construction costs exceeds \$5 million or if the plan contains a single structure that has a total capacity of more than 2,500 acre-feet, the procedure is—

a. The plan is sent to the Office of Management and Budget for review and transmittal to Congress; and

b. Committees of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives approve the plan before federal assistance is made available.

Financing

Making funds available.

The SCS Chief allocates funds for watershed projects from money appropriated each year by Congress.

Cost sharing.

For flood prevention, the federal government pays for all engineering and construction costs. Needed land treatment can be cost shared up to 50 percent for water quality purposes and up to 65 percent for erosion control. For irrigation and drainage and for public recreation and fish and wildlife development, all engineering service and up to 50 percent of the construction costs are provided.

In certain circumstances, the federal government pays up to 50 percent of the cost of the landrights and of the minimum basic facilities for public recreation or for public fish and wildlife development. All other costs, including all costs for municipal and industrial water supply and energy, must be paid by the sponsoring local organization.

Landrights.

The sponsoring local organization must obtain all landrights and permits needed for a watershed project.

Loans and advances.

To help a local organization pay its share of the project cost, the federal government can provide loans through the Farmers Home Administration. The lending period can extend up to 50 years at the federal long-term borrowing rate, with a limit of \$10 million for one project. The federal government can also advance money to preserve sites for future construction once the work plan has been approved. This money must be repaid with interest before construction. Also, the federal government can make money available for the extra cost of developing water-supply storage for future municipal or industrial use. No interest is charged and no repayment of the principal is required until water is first used, except that interest can be deferred for only 10 years after completion of the storage facilities.

Operations

Land treatment.

The sponsoring local organization is responsible for applying needed soil and water conservation treatment. It must be applied before or during construction of the works of improvement. SCS technicians and others can provide additional technical assistance to accomplish this during the time specified in the watershed plan.

Engineering work.

Engineers make field surveys and prepare designs and specifications for construction. The sponsoring local organization has the option to employ its own engineers or obtain them through SCS.

Project agreements.

SCS and the sponsoring local organization enter into an agreement covering each potential contract for the construction of works of improvement. This agreement is the basis for obligating federal funds.

Construction.

The sponsoring local organization is responsible for issuing bids and letting contracts for construction unless, at the request of the local organization, SCS has agreed to administer the contracts. Contractors build the structures and other works of improvement.

Operation and maintenance.

Once the works of improvement are installed, the sponsoring local organization is responsible for operation and maintenance. The organization must sign a written operation and maintenance agreement before federal funds are made available for any construction.

